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AUTHOR Miller, Jerry W.
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ABSTRACT

From the outset, those concerned with making nontraditional study a viable educational alternative in American society have been concerned with the question of recognition. Discussions have centered around the assessment of experiential learning; evaluation of nontraditional learning experiences; process versus product evaluation; and accreditation. Creditability mechanisms for nontraditional education must be shaped by such factors as learning modes, sponsorship, and supervision of the educational process. The required structures for validating nontraditional learning should develop along 5 basic assumptions: (1) Traditional education will be the touchstone for nontraditional education. (2) Nontraditional education will be socially useful if it is provided an interface with traditional education. (3) The credit hour will remain the basic unit of educational currency. (4) Degrees and other credentials will be awarded by traditional institutions. (5) Fairness should dictate that higher standards not be required for nontraditional than for traditional education. (Author/PG)

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Jerry W. Miller

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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The Creditability of Nontraditional Education: A Conceptual Framework for Recognition

From the outset, those concerned with making nontraditional study a viable educational alternative in American society have been concerned with, and have considered, the question of recognition. Within that context, discussions have centered around the assessment of experiential learning, evaluation of nontraditional learning experiences, process versus product evaluation, and accreditation. The rhetoric has been of high quality and it has tended to clarify and sort the issues and problems.

Yet, the problems and many of the issues still remain and are likely to for some time to come. Considerable research, debate, academic soul searching, and developmental activities will be required before the educational community reaches a workable consensus on matters related to the recognition of nontraditional learning. Encouraging and promising developments are occurring, however. Moreover, it appears that the problems and issues related to the recognition of

nontraditional learning will be addressed in a continuing and systematic manner and in settings which will involve knowledgeable and respected educational leaders and educational organizations of reputation and stature.

These developments are occurring because it is widely recognized that formal and accepted mechanisms for recognizing and validating learning are critical components of any movement to expand nontraditional educational opportunities. Pragmatically stated, learning for learning's sake is a noble and worthy educational endeavor which attracts a good number of students. However, most individuals are motivated to learn by more tangible rewards. In society currently, these rewards most often come as a result of holding an acceptable educational credential. It is therefore imperative that means be available to credential nontraditional learning so all learners are treated as equitably as possible in the system of social rewards for individual knowledge and competencies. Social justice, as Roger W. Heyns, President

of the American Council on Education, recently observed, requires no less.

Acceptable procedures for recognizing nontraditional learning are also essential for other reasons: to separate the valid from the bogus and to distinguish between programs of acceptable and inferior quality. Quackery and issuance of worthless or invalid credentials have long been part of the educational scene. The expansion of nontraditional learning as a viable educational option unfortunately will provide these entrepreneurs with more room to maneuver. The features which have been used to distinguish between the legitimate and the bogus are now blurred. Therefore, third-party validation, involving systematic and sophisticated evaluation, becomes even more important for consumer protection and maintaining the meaning and social worth of credentials.

In attempting to structure formal and accepted procedures for recognizing nontraditional learning it is natural and reasonable to turn to existing systems and agencies. They have the experience, the organization, standing, and acceptance of the academic community. Another reason

is that creating new agencies would be counterproductive. Establishing new agencies would involve a number of likely problems, paramount among them the likelihood that the recognition they confer would not carry the same value and prestige as the already functioning groups. Moreover, existing agencies are responding to the recommendations of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, which is substantial evidence that they are adaptable, alive, and viable organizations.

Third-party validation of institutional and programmatic educational quality and of a given set of attributes or learning of individuals (attitudes, competencies, knowledge, and skills) has long been a socially useful concept. To emphasize the point further, it is a process which is required in an increasing number of competency areas for the smooth functioning of the social order. Both third-party validation approaches--testing or measurement of individual learning and assessing the integrity and competency of institutions or other educational sponsors--will be the mainstays for making nontraditional

learning experiences creditable toward academic degrees and other credentials.

Creditability mechanisms for nontraditional education must be shaped by such factors as--learning modes, sponsorship, and supervision of the educational process. The required structures for validating nontraditional learning are in the embryonic and slightly more advanced stages. They appear to be developing or should develop in line with five basic assumptions:

1. Traditional education--its values, standards, policies, practices, products, and reward system--will be the touchstone for nontraditional education. (They should not become strictures, and influences should be felt in both directions, because practices in nontraditional learning, can enrich and, in places such as evaluation of student achievement, shore up traditional education.)

2. Nontraditional education will flourish and be socially useful if it is provided an adequate interface with traditional education. The

interface with the most efficacy is a system which equitably recognizes all learning, regardless of where and how it takes place.

3. The credit hour will remain the basic unit of educational currency in the foreseeable future. Other units or systems may come into use, but their worth in the educational marketplace will be based on their comparability with credit hours and degrees requiring a certain number of credit hours or periods of study. Nontraditional educational experiences which can be measured in terms of credit hours will enhance the flow of credit among varied educational programs and institutions.

4. Degrees and other educational credentials will continue to be awarded in the main by traditional institutions. A limited number of nontraditional institutions will become operative, however. Acceptance of credit to meet requirements for degrees will probably become more liberal to include increasing amounts of learning gained through nontraditional means.

5. Elemental fairness dictates that the educational community not require higher standards or more stringent validation procedures for nontraditional learning than it requires for traditional education.

These assumptions, seemingly valid at this stage in the evolution of nontraditional education, will be refined and perhaps totally reshaped with experience. At this point in time, they appear to be a sufficiently sound basis on which to proceed to structure a validation or recognition system for nontraditional learning.

Structuring such a system also requires a categorization of nontraditional learning. The American Council on Education, for purposes of planning its activities, used three distinct categories, which appear to have considerable utility. They are as follows:

1. Nonformal learning experiences which result in the accumulation of knowledge or competencies. Such learning may be achieved through nonrequired reading or on-the-job experience. It normally is not supervised or sponsored and is, therefore, unstructured. It would

include experiential learning or learning which results from "life experiences." Such learning is now measured through standardized testing programs such as the Tests of General Educational Development at the secondary school level and tests of the College Level Examination Program at the postsecondary level. Various other assessment instruments and procedures are used by institutions to measure informal learning.

2. Formal learning experiences which normally take place in a classroom or laboratory, have a specific program of instruction and objectives, use traditional instruction or are closely supervised, and culminate with an evaluation of student performance. Their non-traditional character relates mainly to their sponsorship by agencies which are not chartered or licensed educational institutions. The military services and business and industry educational programs are prime examples.

3. Institutionally sponsored learning experiences which are

termed nontraditional mainly because of the mode of instruction. They have specific learning objectives, are supervised to a degree, and normally culminate with an evaluation of student achievement. Contract-for-degree activities, independent study, field experience education, and mentor supervised study would be classified in this category. Non-traditional institutions may offer primarily these types of learning experiences and traditional institutions may offer a limited number of these opportunities to complement or supplement their traditional offerings.

It is immediately obvious that one type of nontraditional educational structure does not precisely fit the three categories: the validating or assessing external degree program, institution, or organization. This function, as will be subsequently discussed, requires essentially the same third-party evaluation processes as category three, however.

Using these classifications, it would be helpful to elaborate on

developments already underway to establish third-party validation mechanisms and to provide some pertinent commentary.

Nonformal Learning Experiences

Assessment of learning is the sine qua non of educational credit. Without assessment, the concept of educational credit loses its reason for being. Without assessment, "life experiences" or experiential learning cannot be meaningfully articulated and integrated as integral components of programs of study for degrees or other educational credentials. And without the possibility of receiving credit for informal and experiential learning, and important component of nontraditional study is likely to be grossly underutilized. Valid and economical assessment procedures and instruments, therefore, become increasingly critical, not only to credentialing a learning society but also to the utilization of new opportunities.

One survey has turned up a wide variety of institutional policies and procedures for measuring and awarding credit for life experiences.

Policies and procedures run the gamut from blanket award of credit without assessment, to some credit based on CLEP or departmental examinations, to no credit at all. Furthermore, many institutions are expressing considerable uneasiness with these variances in policies and measurement procedures.

Two types of activities appear needed: (1) development of new, improved, and economical assessment procedures for experiential learning, and (2) the development of a body of recommendations to institutions of postsecondary education regarding policies and procedures they should follow in awarding credit for informal learning experiences. Both activities will soon be receiving attention.

The Educational Testing Service will be the lead agency for a consortium of institutions to be involved in a project called "Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning." Objectives of the project will be to inventory current assessment procedures, develop new ones, test their reliability and validity, and disseminate the results to the

field. With regard to the second need, the American Council on Education, in expanding the services of its Commission on Accreditation of Service Experiences, now known as the Commission on Educational Credit, is committed to exploring the development of a set of recommendations relative to the measurement of informal learning experiences. ACE already makes recommendations regarding use of CLEP examinations and military educational experiences. The ETS-led project will provide valuable data and input for the ACE's efforts. Both projects should provide valuable assistance to traditional and nontraditional institutions and to assessing and validating institutions and agencies.

Formal Courses Offered by Noneducational Institutions

The Commission on Non-Traditional Study, recognizing that educational programs of substantial quality and quantity are sponsored by noneducational institutions, recommended that the policies and procedures used by the American Council on Education to evaluate courses

offered by formal military training schools be extended to formal training of business, industry, and other departments of federal government. ACE, in collaboration with other educational agencies and institutions over the next several months, will endeavor to develop a national system for evaluating courses sponsored by noneducational institutions. Within the last eight months, the Council has substantially revamped its policies and procedures for the evaluation of military educational experiences. These have immediate application for other educational sponsors.

The proposed jurisdictional dividing line between the educational evaluations conducted by ACE and its collaborating agencies and institutions and those evaluations conducted by the regional and specialized accrediting agencies is generally as follows: (1) the legally chartered and licensed educational institutions continue to be evaluated by regional associations on an institution-wide basis or by specialized agencies on a programmatic basis, a longstanding practice, and (2) that other

sponsors have their courses evaluated by ACE and its collaborators on a course-by-course basis--the current practice--for the purpose of establishing credit equivalency recommendations.

Based on institutional acceptance of the resulting credit recommendations, students involved in formal study sponsored by noneducational institutions will be able to integrate these learning experiences into programs of study for degrees and other credentials at both traditional and nontraditional institutions.

Institutionally-Sponsored Learning Experiences

Regional accreditation, under policies developed by the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education, is already being utilized to validate nontraditional learning experiences sponsored or assessed by educational institutions. The regional commissions on higher and postsecondary education, through FRACHE, have adopted an "Interim Statement on Accreditation and Non-Traditional Study," setting

forth general policies and guidelines for regional accreditation. A new statement is being developed. Additionally, regional commissions have already made initial accreditation visits to nontraditional institutions of both the validating and instructional models.

Institutional accreditation, i. e., regional accreditation and increasingly national groups conducting accreditation of specialized institutions, has stood the test of time as a socially useful and educationally efficacious means of determining minimally acceptable quality of educational opportunity. Often criticized, and sometimes justly so, institutional accreditation has nonetheless consistently weathered its critics because of their inability to conceptualize a process as durable or with as much utility.

Accreditation--both institutional and specialized--marshalls peer review and collective professional subjective judgement, both essential components of educational acceptability and face validity, and brings them to bear upon the problems of educational evaluation. Accreditation

provides periodic external validation of institutional policies and procedures and relies, as we all must, on a critical mass of professional expertise and integrity at each institution.

Regional accreditation has had a long history of evaluating institutions in terms of their stated objectives. Institutions already accredited run the spectrum from those with only limited vocational offerings, to highly specialized institutions, to ultracomplex graduate and research universities. Accrediting nontraditional institutions and evaluating nontraditional offerings of traditional institutions will not greatly tax the resources of ingenuity of existing accrediting agencies. Their main problem will be feigning off charges that they are protectors of the status quo. A careful examination of the record shows, generally speaking, that such charges are generally unfounded.

Proprietary Education

The tendency has been among many to view proprietary education as

part of nontraditional education even though it may be the most traditional of all in terms of age. The tendency has also been to assume that proprietary education will require some form of special validation in addition to that already available to make learning that occurs in these institutional settings transferable toward credentials at the more "traditional" institutions.

Proprietary institutions are already served by accrediting agencies with standing and expertise such as the accrediting commissions of the Association of Independent Colleges and Schools, the National Home Study Council, and the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools. Imposing another validation system on top of accreditation by these agencies would tend to undercut and devalue the status they grant. The wiser and more statesman like position of the public and nonprofit sectors of the academic community would be to develop relationships with these agencies which will hasten the day when their accreditation would enjoy essentially the same acceptance and relationship to transfer of credit

as regional accreditation.

These agencies and the schools they accredit would generally oppose another validation of their efforts with one possible exception. Officials of the National Home Study Council have expressed an interest in having the American Council evaluate courses offered by their accredited institutions. NHSC does not evaluate courses or programs in terms of credit or clock hours; rather its evaluation of courses is conducted on the basis of how well the instructional program accomplishes the stated objectives of the course of study. Courses may be of very short duration involving only four or five lessons or they may run to 50 lessons or more. Therefore, ACE evaluation of home study courses for the purposes of establishing credit equivalencies would not entirely duplicate the purposes of NHSC accreditation but would enhance the transferability of credit.

Summary

If, as some have argued, there is nothing nontraditional about what

we currently term nontraditional education, perhaps what has happened is a mere grouping of educational practices that have long been scattered among the educational system. If that be true, the words of Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington in Space, Time and Gravitation are particularly appropriate:

> We have found a strange footprint on the shores of the unknown. We have devised profound theories, one after another, to account for its origin. At last we have succeeded in reconstructing the creature that made the footprint. And lo! it is our own.

Be it a discovery, a rediscovery, or a regrouping, the educational community is focusing on nontraditional education as one of many learning opportunities that should be available to society. As is our usual custom, we are not doing it quietly. The world is looking on with great interest and expectations are being created. The expectations are of two sorts: (1) that new educational opportunities will become available to hitherto unserved populations, as well as to populations which have been served traditional fare, and (2) that by seizing these opportunities participants will share more fully in economic, professional, and other

social rewards that comes with being officially educated.

Thus, making nontraditional education fully creditable is a task of no small magnitude or importance. The essential forces to accomplish this objective appear to be in motion. In a climate of fairness, open-mindedness, and willingness to reassess traditional policies and practices, they show great promise of succeeding.